RUSSIAN ICONS

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FOURTEEN PLATES IN COLOUR
TWELVE FULLPAGE ILLUSTRATIONS

INTRODUCTION
BY PHILIPP SCHWEINFURTH

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LIST OF THE COLOUR PLATES

LIST OF THE MONOCHROME ILLUSTRATIONS

LIST OF THE COLLECTIONS AND MUSEUMS CONTAINING THE ICONS REPRODUCED IN THIS BOOK

Russia: National Museum, Moscow / Russian Museum, Leningrad / Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow / Troice-Servieva Lavra.

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References

Prof. *A. J. Asinov, Our Lady of Vladimir,* Translated by Princess N. G. Yaschiwill and T. N. Rodzianko, «Materials touching the History of Icon Painting». Seminarium Kondakovakianum, Prague, 1928.

Collection of Richard Zeiner-Henriksen, Jr., Oslo. *Russian Icons of the 16th and 17th centuries.* Coloured Plates.

N. D. Kondakov: The Russian Icon. Album of LXV coloured plates. Seminarium Kondakovakianum, Prague, 1928.

All the coloured plates, with the exception of plate IX, which is reproduced from the Piper facsimile, have been reproduced directly from the originals.

In the research and the photographic work for the monochrome plates the editor of this book has been greatly helped by the *Institut Byzantin, Paris,* and wishes to express his thanks to Prof. Ermoloff and his staff for the kind assistance which was given him by them.

The iconographical notes to the coloured plates are by Philipp Schweinfurth.



PLATE I

THE ARCHANGEL MICHAEL

School of Moscow, c. 1550. 23 8/4 × 17 1/5 in.
Coll. Dr. S. Amberg, Ettiswil, Switzerland

«The dread Vojvode leader of the hosts of the Lord» — such is the title of the apocalyptic representation of the Archangel Michael, crowned and in full armour, galloping towards the spectator on a horse shod with gold, a cloud as his stirrup and a trumpet issuing from his mouth. In his battle with Satan, who is tumbling into the abyss with the ruins of cities, he holds a lance and swings a censer with his right hand, while with the left he holds up a book. The whole is powerful in movement and vigorous in colouring, and superbly drawn. The head and neck of the horse, and more especially the shape of its wing, go back to the Sassanid peacock-dragon, the Senmurv. The figure of Satan is unusual for a work of Byzantine art, since it is double-faced and recalls devils in medieval Western art. The general character of the painting points to a date about 1550 and the School of Moscow, which is further confirmed by the high quality of the drawing and colouring. The «Michael Voyvode» is a church banner, painted on canvas, the web of which is concealed by a chalk ground saturated with lime. On the reverse of the banner there is the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple.



1

NATURE AND MEANING OF THE ICONS

IT IS COMING to be realized more and more clearly that the old Russian icons belong, both in form and significance, to an artistic category of their own. At the same time, greater efforts are being made to appreciate and define their distinctive quality.

From the time of its origins in the 11th and 12th centuries down to the 18th century, the traditional art of the icon* produced works which could be compared to Western European painting as long as

* Icon, Greek « picture » originally used both for murals and easel pictures. The Russian religious painting is called *«ikona»* or *«obraz»*, pl. *«ikony»* or *«obrazy»*

PLATE II
THE ANNUNCIATION

Stroganov School, c. 1600. 12½ × 10¾ in.
Coll. M. Winkler, Possenhofen, Germany

The ecclesiastical writers of the Orthodox Church denote the Day of the Annunciation as one «that has not its like in the history of the world», for it was the beginning of the salvation of man. At a moment which human speech can hardly render, the Creator was brought into His Creation by the Virgin's words: «Be it unto me according to thy word».

The account of the Annunciation in St. Luke provided too little material for a real visual representation of this unique event. There was more in the Apocrypha. Although not included in the canonical books of the New Testament, the Apocrypha was greatly venerated, especially in the Eastern Church. Thus the miniatures in two manuscripts of the same name dating from the 12th century and containing sermons in honour of the Virgin depict episodes of her life as narrated in the so-called Gospel of St. James. Here the Annunciation begins with the Prologue in Heaven, the sending forth of the Archangel Gabriel by God the Father. Gabriel, invisible to all, first proceeds to the house of the Virgin in order to make himself familiar with the place in which he has to fulfil his divine mission. Then, still invisible, he speaks to the startled Virgin as she is fetching water from the well. The second time, he appears to her while she is spinning scarlet wool for a curtain for the Temple in Jerusalem. This time she sees him, hears his message, and answers it. This is the moment pictured on the icons of the Annunciation, for instance on one dating about 1600, in the style of a miniature and lavishly decorated with gold. The figures of the Archangel and the Virgin are represented in dramatic movement on a background of highly fanciful architectural motives which is characteristic of the icons of the period. The supreme significance of the event is expressed in the sweeping gestures and huge nimbuses of the figures. Gabriel is robed in the tunic and cloak symbolic of the messenger. The Virgin, over her dark under-robe, is wrapped in a great shawl known as a *maphorion,* which covers her head and shoulders. Three gold stars on her head and shoulders express her virginity and sanctity. The ray of the Holy Ghost falls from the arc of Heaven, while, with a wide movement of her right hand, she expresses her acceptance of the message the angel has brought. In her left hand, instead of the distaff with the scarlet wool, she holds the scroll containing the prophecy of the Incarnation which is elsewhere the regular attribute of her Son, the incarnate Logos. The raised edge of the picture space which serves as a frame is mounted with wrought silver *(basma).* The rich, deep colours, which stand out with great effect on the pale yellow and pink of the background, are arranged with great taste and skill and are beautifully set off by the silver of the frame.



II

the Romanesque style dominated the West. A sharp and growing contrast between old Russian and Western European painting set in with the rise of Gothic in the second half of the 12th century. In the succeeding centuries it deepened until it attained that complete cleavage which can be strikingly illustrated by a comparison of pictures by Piero della Francesco or Jan van Eyck with those of their near contemporary, Andrej Rubljev.

To find an explanation for this state of affairs, we must look back to the beginnings of medieval painting in East and West.

Before they came into contact with the Church, the only form of art familiar both to Russia and the West was purely linear and decorative in kind, and was, in both cases, stationary in character. Idols have come down to us from pre-Christian Russia which have not advanced beyond the most primitive of forms. The feeling for the independent significance of the human figure, which derived from the Greek conception of the dignity of man as the visible symbol of humanity, first entered into the tradition both of Russia and the West in the figures of the Church saints. It was these figures, suddenly rising upon and widening their horizon, which first awakened a finer sense of form in Russia, as it did in the early history of Western art after the fall of the West Roman Empire. In both cases, a completely new stimulus was given to the imagination. But as time went on, in spite of the similarity of circumstances, the contrast between a Russian icon and a West European painting can be seen to deepen more and more.

Ultimately, it arises from the different valuation attached to the image in the Eastern and Western church. In the West, the image has always ranked as a subordinate element of the cultus, tolerated, but, in the end of ends, superfluous. Gregory the Great, that most eminent of Popes, called the images a Bible for the poor in spirit,



2

PLATE III

THE VIRGIN OF KORSUN

School of Moscow, 16th century. 10½ × 7¾ in.
Coll. V. Wehrlin, Paris, France

The ancient Greek colonial city of Chersonesus Taurica, founded by the Dorians, became the starting point of the Christianization of Russia by Byzantium owing to the fact that St. Vladimir had been baptized and married to one of the Emperor's daughters there in 988. In later times, ancient ritual objects, and especially icons believed to be very old, were always described as being from Chersonesus, «Korsun». The adjective *«korsunskaja»*, i. e. of Korsun, continued to be attached even to pictures which were mere copies of those venerable originals, in particular certain types of icon in which the Virgin is represented tenderly bending towards the Child.

In Russia, the Virgin is represented on the same general principles as in Byzantine art. The «Mother of God», the «Most Holy», who, in the imagination of the Eastern Church, is elevated above all saints and heavenly orders, is pictured as a general feminine type with no hint of any recognizable earthly beauty. It is for that reason that the Eastern Church rejected the Raphaelesque Madonna. In the same way, the Child must not be presented as a specific child. The incarnate Logos in the arms of the Mother of God is always clothed in tunic and cloak like an adult and is, as a rule, shod with sandals.



III

since they could take the place of the written scriptures for the illiterate mass. Five centuries later, Bonaventura, the Franciscan, said the same thing: it was the ignorance of the common people which made the images necessary. At the same time, the image, in the West, was inserted into the system of « those who intercede and help in need ». Further, the execution of the image was left more and more to the personal judgment of the artists who made them, and after the beginning of independent life in the cities in the 12th century, those artists had been, for the most part, laymen (Bonnano explicitly describes his status in this way on the bronze doors at Monreale in 1186 - *Bonnanus civis Pisanus*). We have confirmation of this state of affairs in the second half of the 13th century from Durandus the liturgist, who admits in a verse imitated from Horace that a certain freedom must be granted to the personal imagination of the artists who adorn the Church with images.

In the East, within the Greek Church, the conception of the nature and significance of the image was totally different. In the early centuries, opinion as to the value and permissibility of images had been divided, and in 726 a violent dispute on the subject arose in the East Roman Empire which divided the clergy into two camps, image-worshippers (iconolaters) and image-breakers (iconoclasts). The Emperors cast the whole power of the state now on one side, now on the other, while the populace was roused to extreme excitement. During the next hundred years and more, the dispute flamed up repeatedly. In 754, an iconoclastic Council had been held, whose decisions had later been declared null and void, but the iconolaters already triumphed at the Council of Nicaea in 787, and were finally victorious in 843.

This victory not only firmly established the image in the Eastern church, but had another consequence of far-reaching significance, namely, the elaboration of a special doctrine of images. This was largely



3

PLATE IV
THE ASCENSION

School of Moscow, 17th century. 28 × 21¾ in.
Coll. V. Wehrlin, Paris, France

In accordance with the Byzantine tradition, the Ascension is represented in an unvarying iconographical scheme, the earliest examples of which are to be seen in the Rabula Gospel (Laurentian Library, Florence) and on the «Ampullae of Monza», which date from before 600. Humble as they look, they are of the utmost historical importance. They are small round capsules made of an alloy of lead and tin, about as big as a vest-pocket watch and sheathed somewhat after the fashion of a military flask. They contained the oil, believed to be miraculous and healing, from the lamps which burned perpetually in the sacred places of Palestine. These ampullae were brought by pilgrims from the Holy Land. About 603, a number of them were presented, with other gifts, by Pope Gregory the Great to Queen Theodelinda of Lombardy, and have been preserved in the Cathedral treasury at Monza. A number of them were on view at the exhibition of Lombard art held at Zurich in 1948. In addition to the Greek inscriptions describing their contents, these little lead vessels bear copies in relief of the monumental mosaics and frescoes in the churches founded in Palestine by Constantine and Theodosius, which were destroyed in the Persian and Arab invasions of the 7th century.

The Ascension icon derives, by way of a Byzantine model, from a primitive Palestinian type, the difference being that the Virgin, symbolizing, in the midst of the Apostles, the Church which abides on earth, is also represented in the gesture of prayer with outstretched hands; the head, however, is not given full-face, but is turned to the side. Further, the Russian artist introduces a decorative motive in the rugged rocks which form the background, in which his delight in the primitive expressiveness of linear ornament can be felt. In the two angels he has the opportunity of setting off the beautiful white of classical painting in contrast to the sonorous group of the Apostles, the crimson of the Virgin, and the red with which she is shod.



IV

the work of St. John Damascene, and was adopted by the second Council of Nicaea in 797. In the 9th century, it was further developed by St. Theodore Studites, abbot of the Monastery of Studium which, since its foundation in the 5th century, had been held in great veneration not only in Constantinople, but throughout Eastern Christendom, including Russia.

The West, which had endeavoured to temper the passions of the iconoclasts in Constantinople, did not understand the Byzantine doctrine of images. Charlemagne's court theologians rejected the ideas of both parties to the dispute. The contemporary Popes vacillated. The image continued to be tolerated by the Western church as the Bible of the ignorant, or inserted into the system of «those who intercede and help in need».

The East, on the other hand, regarded the doctrines of St. John Damascene and St. Theodore Studites as «a new chapter in Christology». Since the image stands witness, no less than Scripture, to the great act of salvation by representing the human figure as sanctified by the Incarnation, it was held to be as sacred as Scripture. But the image could only maintain its position if it proved its title to sacredness by being as changeless as Scripture. The authenticity and the guarantee of its sacredness rested on the changelessness of subject and treatment, in which no emphasis was allowed on the corporeality of earthly things, even by effects of light and shade. Thus the image, which bore within it «a mysterious, but actual kinship with the Divine» could convey to the beholders the mystery of the Incarnation, and permit them to gaze upon the countenance of the Eternal and sense a higher world in His earthly features.

In these circumstances, it is hardly to be wondered at if the Russian icon is quite different in character from the Western picture. The Western artist could, and did, vary the subject of his pictures. The





PLATE V

JESUS IN THE TEMPLE AT JERUSALEM

School of Novgorod, 15th century. 21¼ × 17 in.
Coll. V. Wehrlin, Paris, France

A remarkable 15th century icon from Novgorod shows the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple at Jerusalem, interpreting the law to the scribes. What first strikes the eye is the powerful juxtaposition of red and green in the robes of the scribes, to which is added, very skilfully but also without transition, scarlet, and the black and white of the turbans. The youthful Jesus is clad in the brownish yellow which, relieved by lighter stripes, represents gold in the earlier Russian icons. The seat on which the whole assembly is enthroned goes back to the semi-circular, stepped seat of the bishop and clergy in the apse of churches, and is in a somewhat deeper brown. Among the architectural motives in the background, a huge, tower-like structure sets off the figure of Jesus, which stands out against its light colour. The gate-like erection to the right is the entrance to the Holy of Holies. A red curtain and a green roof continue the red-green contrast of the lower half of the picture, but its vivacity is tempered by the greyish-yellow of the buildings. Here we can see the skill and sensitiveness of the School of Novgorod, which largely simplified the extremely rich range of colour in the Byzantine models. Further, it is in the School of Novgorod, the great cultural centre of the north of Russia, that we see best the influence of antique form on Byzantine painting. In this icon it comes out in the two groups of scribes which face each other in the way usual in the philosophical conversations in famous classical mosaics; in fact it actually descends from them, in the same way as the figure of the youthful Jesus in its pose and the gesture addressed to the listening groups.



V

more the vital and enquiring spirit of the West cast off the tutelage of the Church, the more it found direct expression even in religious painting, and in the end, the Western picture became completely alienated from its religious purpose. The Russian painting, on the other hand, in accordance with its high mission and faithful to its sacred principle, remained unchanged within the splendid changelessness of the Eastern church. It never became alienated from its religious purpose. Secular painting, which began under Peter the Great and his immediate successors, was at first an import, then an imitation of imports. It never struck deep roots.

The changelessness of subject and treatment in the Russian icons was responsible for the lasting belief, outside the Eastern Church, that they were not works of art, but simply and solely liturgical objects. One of the few who examined them more closely, and endeavoured to discover their purely artistic aspect, was Goethe, whose attention had been drawn to them by Seroux d'Agincourt, whom he had met in Angelica Kauffmann's circle in Rome.

★

THE FIRST thing to strike us in the Russian icons is the extraordinary artistic instinct of those who made them. In spite of the devoutness with which they regarded their distant Byzantine models, they contrived to give them a more popular appeal, both in line and colour. Thus in 1924, Fannina Halle remarked quite rightly that the icon was « a testimony to joy, strength and vitality, and hence to the character of the Russian people ». At the same time, however, we realize that it is the sublimity of classical art which lends life to the changeless subjects of old Russian icons; the same is true of Byzantine art itself, from which the icons derive.



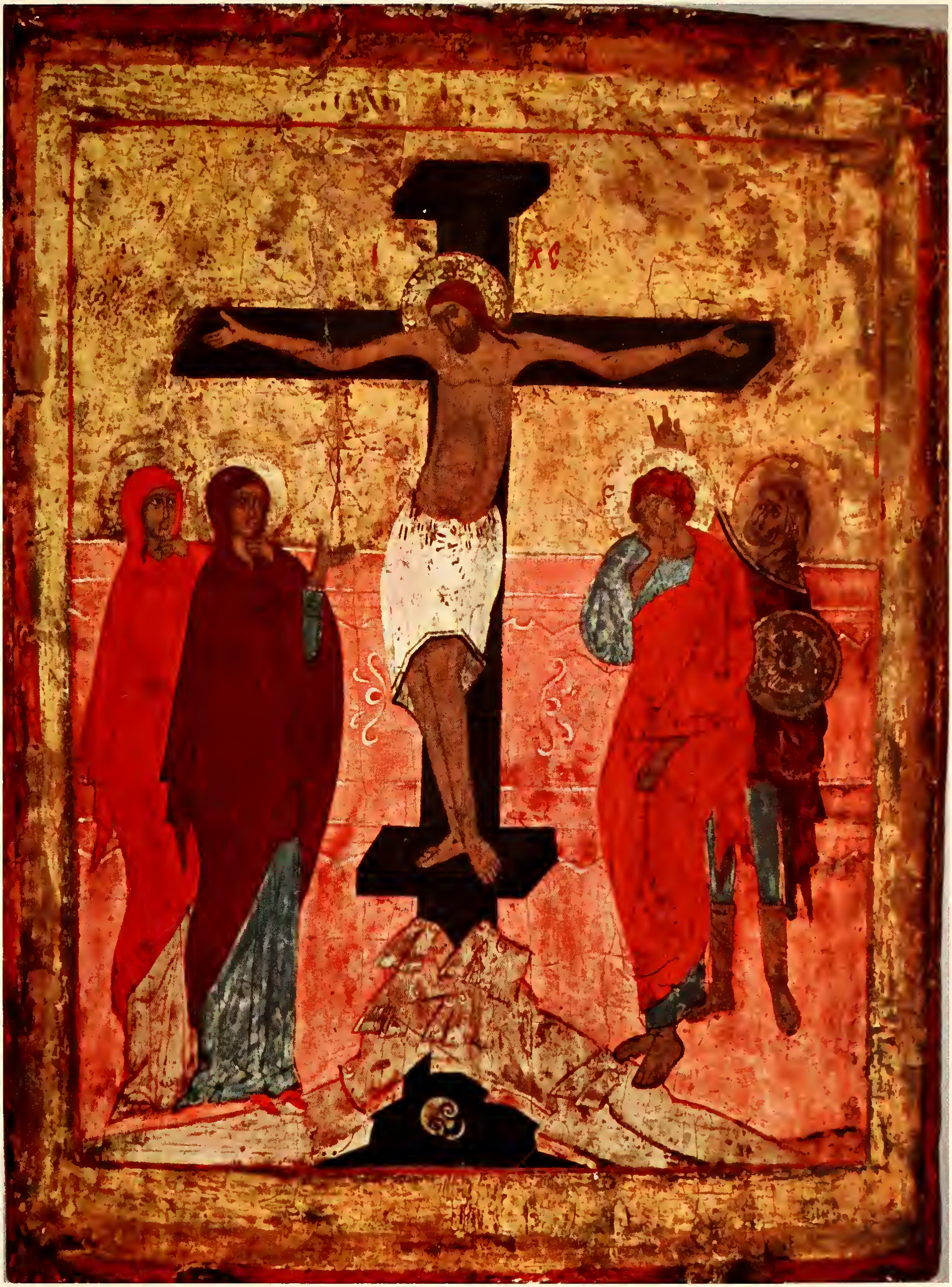
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PLATE VI

THE CRUCIFIXION

South Russian School, c. 1600. 18 × 14 in.
Private Coll., Paris, France

A Crucifixion, notable for its beautiful rhythm, shows the Virgin, Mary Magdalene, the Apostle John, here figured as a youth, and the faithful centurion at the foot of the Cross.



VI

From the subdued harmony of the composition, the rhythm of gestures and the self-contained calm of the individual figure, to the rules governing the moving figure (which even gave Dürer trouble) everything is pre-determined in the classical sense. Even the colours come from classical art by way of Byzantium, especially in the Moscow school which, unlike the simpler and more popular Novgorod school, worked, in the 14th and 15th centuries, in close dependence on the Byzantine models. Thus we find in the work of Andrej Rubljev (c. 1360–1430), beside a range of light colours, that white which is so beautiful a feature of Pompeiian frescoes, and which is beyond the power of painters of our day. (There is a famous saying of Renoir's – that the supreme achievement, for him, would be to paint a white table-napkin). Paul Muratoff, the first to publish a study of old Russian icons as works of art, in 1910, remarked when discussing the extreme rarity of authentic Byzantine icons: «It may be that these Russian icons are our sole opportunity of obtaining a direct visual impression not unlike that given by the vanished masterpieces of the ancient Greek painters».

Here we can realize how different old Russian art is from that of the West, even in its formal character; the notion of the Renaissance, as understood in the West, has no place in it.



6

PLATE VII

THE TRANSFIGURATION

Central Russian School, 16th century. 63 × 53 in.
Coll. A. Wegener, Essen, Germany

In the 14th century, when the fall of Constantinople was not far off, the question whether the light which surrounded Jesus during the Transfiguration was created or uncreated was hotly disputed. The victory of those who stood for the uncreated light and the ascetic practices by which it could be made visible was expressed in the icons by the stars in Christ's nimbus and the torrent of light: this had its influence in the Russian icons.



VII

THE SCREEN, TECHNIQUE, SCHOOLS

Archdeacon Paul of Aleppo, who accompanied his father, Patriarch Makarios of Antioch, on his visit to Russia in 1655, marvelled at the host of icons he saw in Russian churches. In the Christian East there were fewer of them, nor were so many assembled on the screen. Whether in the Near East or the Balkans, the screen is never so huge as it is in the Russian church, where as many many as 80 icons may be seen in orderly arrangement.

In the Greek Orthodox Church, the screen (Russian «*ikonostás*») separates the nave from the chancel. It has three doors, the central and



PLATE VIII

THE ANNUNCIATION

North Russian, c. 1580. 21¹/₂ × 17¹/₂ in.
Coll. V. Wehrlin, Paris, France

The icon of the Annunciation with the antique velum stretched across the background, and magnificent, broad contrasts of deep green, cherry red, sealing-wax red and yellow, shows a deviation from Byzantine models.



VIII

largest one being called the Royal Door, because Christ the King is carried out through it during divine service. In the early part of the service, this door remains shut, but after the transubstantiation, which takes place in the chancel out of sight of the congregation, it is opened, all the candles on the altar having been lit. Then the priest, the incarnation of an angel, issues from it in glittering gold vestments, carrying the sacred substances, and distributes the sacrament to the kneeling congregation with a spoon which St. John Chrysostom, the great liturgist of the Eastern church, likens to the tongs with which the seraph seized the live coal from the altar which was to touch the lips of Isaiah.

There are three screens which are of great importance for the study of old Russian icons: one in the Cathedral of the Annunciation in the Kremlin, dated 1405, the joint work of the «Greek Theophanes» and the Russian monks Prokor of Geodez and Andrej Rubljev; the second in the Cathedral of the Death of the Virgin, at Vladimir, dated 1408, the work of Andrej Rubljev and his «brother in fasting», Danjil Tchorny; the third, dated 1425, in the chapel of the Holy Trinity Monastery near Moscow, also the work of Rubljev and Tchorny. The last includes those icons by Rubljev which are rightly regarded as the most important of old Russian icons.

In the centre of these three screens, as indeed of all Russian screens, there is a row of icons above the Royal Door which, in proportion to the size of the church, may be as much as nine feet in height. There are smaller, portable screens with folding panels for domestic devotion and travelling. The central panel represents Christ Enthroned as Lord of the World, with the Virgin to His right, St. John the Baptist to His left, both in the attitude of intercession. On the next panels to right and left are the Archangel Michael with St. Peter and the Archangel Gabriel with St. Paul, in the same attitude. To these seven



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PLATE IX

THE HOLY TRINITY

Moscow School, 1425. 56½ × 44¾ in.
National Museum, Moscow

Andrej Rubljev's Trinity icon, painted about 1425, derives directly from Byzantine models. The Painting Book of Klinzov states that Rubljev painted this icon for Abbot Nikon of the Holy Trinity Monastery near Moscow. In this icon, the Trinity appears in the guise of the three angels who visited Abraham in the plains of Mamre. None of the many copies of it attain the solemnity and inimitable greatness of feeling in the original. In 1425, the Council of the Hundred Chapters at Moscow declared it to be the model for all future representations of the Trinity, which, throughout Byzantine art, was always pictured as the angels visiting Abraham. With this Byzantine model, Rubljev created a Russian work of art. The stone table under the tree at Mamre, the thrones of the angels and the footstools are seen in reversed perspective, a foreshortening which does not proceed from the spectator, but from the personages in the picture, and goes back to classical painting.

Nothing could be more misleading than the comparison between Rubljev and Fra Angelico, which I have often heard drawn by art historians well versed in West European art. Rubljev lives in a totally different world of rich and esoteric Neo-Platonism. The Master of San Marco devoutly turns to his own ends a few of the elements common to all Byzantine art which repeatedly entered into Western practice.



IX

figures, which must always occupy the seven central panels of the screen, others may be added to right and left, with saints in prayer. The whole is called «*déesis*» (Greek «*deeisis*» prayer or intercession, Russian *deisus* or *tchin*, hierarchy). The essence of the Greek liturgy, «Lord have mercy upon us» (Kyrie eleison, in Russian *Góspodi pômilui*) is bodied forth in this main series of panels, the déesis. Above it, a row of separate icons shows the twelve great annual festivals of the church (Russian «*prazdniki*») illustrated by Biblical scenes. Above that again come the Prophets, with the Virgin in the centre, and finally, at the top, the Patriarchs from Adam to Moses with the Lord God of Sabaoth in the centre.

Under the déesis comes the fifth, lowest row of icons; this is on the level of the Royal Door, which separates it into two halves and is itself adorned with the icons of the Four Evangelists and the Annunciation. Here, beside icons of Christ and the Virgin, there are the so-called «local» icons. They show the saints or church festivals to which the church is dedicated, or to which special veneration is paid in the district. Thus Andrej Rubljev's Trinity icon is a «local» icon on the screen in the chapel of the Trinity in the monastery of the same name near Moscow.

The icons are painted on wooden panels out of which the picture space is chiselled. In order to prevent warping, diagonal strips of wood are affixed to the back. The edges of the panel, which rise above the picture space, form the frame. The whole is then covered with a chalk ground which, following the technique of classical portrait painting, is in its turn overlaid with dark green; on this the faces are modelled in ochre, the dark green ground showing through in the shadows. The ochre of the faces is touched up with red and enlivened with white lead. Tempera is the medium; the colours are mixed with yolk of egg and diluted with kvas, a popular drink made out of sour bread



PLATE X

ST. NICHOLAS

Central Russian, 16th century. 92 × 69 in.
Coll. Ashberg, National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden

is one of the most venerated saints in Russia. He is represented either alone, or enframed in his life and the miracles he wrought both on land and sea, for which reason he is the patron saint of seamen.



X

which replaces intoxicating liquor during fasts. In addition to the dark-green ground, the ochre, the various shades of red – vermilion, scarlet and reddish-brown – the artists also used carmine, ultramarine, indigo, light green and a bluish dark purple.

When the painting was finished, the icons were covered with a varnish *(ólifa)* of boiled linseed oil, which at first enhanced the colours, but turned dark and opaque later, producing the contrary effect. This was the reason for frequent over-painting, under which the original disappeared. Where no over-painting was carried out, the original became indistinguishable in time. Yet under the crust of soot, over-painting and darkened varnish, the original colours retained such a splendid consistency that they reappeared in almost undiminished brilliance when cleaning was taken in hand about fifty years ago.

The drawing underlying the painting could be executed by means of a stencil. There are Russian painting-books dating back to the 17th century, The costly metal cases, in which the icons were sometimes kept *(«rizá», «oklád»)* came in rather late, in the 16th and 17th century. It was they that gave rise to a degenerate form of the icon, in which only those parts were fully executed on the prepared panel which could be seen through the case – namely the faces and hands – all the rest being covered by wrought metal.

It is part of the difference between Russian and West European art that local schools are extremely difficult to distinguish in old Russian painting. Literary sources give very scanty information on the subject. In the chronicles, only the great screens are mentioned, and as screens. It was not until much later that church inventories were made, at a time when exact knowledge of the icons they enumerated had already been lost. The first artists' signatures occur in the so-called Stroganovsky School at the end of the 16th and in the early 17th century. The extant manuals of painting are almost exclusively



PLATE XI

THE NATIVITY

Novgorod School, c. 1400. 21½ × 16½ in.
Coll. George R. Hann, Pittsburgh, USA.

The Nativity, the Baptism of Christ and the Death of the Virgin belong to the twelve festival icons and contain many details from the Apocrypha. The Nativity, which includes the tidings to the shepherds and the adoration of the Magi, radiates the joy of the Christmas hymns in which it is said that the angels' message « interrupted the sound of the shepherds' flutes »; for that reason a boy playing a flute always figures in icons of the Nativity. The Virgin of the Nativity, always reclining, is particularly graceful; the dark cave symbolizes the Passion. We see the bathing of the Child by the attendant women, and Joseph, sitting at the side, being tempted to confusion by the devil in the guise of Thyrsus the Shepherd.



XI

confined to iconographics and technical details, and like the «Mount Athos Painting-Book», give very little useful information in the way of art history. There was no foundation of any kind for an art literature such as arose in Italy after the Byzantine evacuation, with the notes of Ser Ristoro d'Arezzo and Ghiberti's Commentaries, and developed into later works such as those of Vasari, van Mander, Sandrart or Houbraken.

The oldest schools of Kiev, Vladimir and Suzdal declined after the Tartar invasions in the middle of the 13th century. Novgorod, on the other hand, the Russian Florence, which the Tartars failed to reach, became the centre of a great efflorescence of the icon in a popular and very vigorous style. Here the Byzantine models were modified, becoming more purely decorative. At the same time there existed in the 14th and 15th century another highly-developed school in Moscow, which followed the Byzantine models more faithfully. There can be no doubt that special workshops existed in other large Russian cities; their products, however, are difficult to distinguish. The imperial art of Moscow degenerated after the 16th and 17th centuries; it became ostentatious with metal work and rigid in execution and adopted undigested elements of Western style which had come to Russia by way of German and Dutch book engravings. The contemporary Stroganovsky School, however, skilfully perpetuated the tradition. It took its name from its patron, Stroganov, the coloniser of the Far Russian North and the initiator of the conquest of Siberia. The icons of the Stroganovsky School, with a technique approaching that of miniature and a lavish use of gold, date from 1580–1620. After Peter the Great, the official art of the icon declined into a somewhat unpleasantly hybrid style through the imitation of Western models, but the old, valuable style was maintained among the peasants, who practised the art of the icon as a kind of «cottage industry» in the



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PLATE XII

BAPTISM OF CHRIST

School of Moscow, c. 1500. $12^{1/2} \times 10^{3/4}$ in.
Coll. S. Zolotnitzky, New York, USA.

In this beautifully harmonious Baptism, personifications of the sea and the River Jordan can be seen in the Jordan, freely conceived in classical form.



XII

PLATE XIII

THE DEATH OF THE VIRGIN

Central Russia, 17th century. 31 × 23 in.
Coll. George R. Hann, Pittsburgh, USA.

In the Death of the Virgin, we see the figure of Jephonias, who attempted to overturn the bier with the body of the Virgin, surrounded by the mourning Apostles and St. James, the first Bishop of Jerusalem. To punish him, an angel is hacking off both his hands with a sword.



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district of Vladimir; it was also perpetuated by the persecuted sect of the «Old Believers». It was from the latter that N. S. Leskoff took the subject of his famous legend: «The Sealed Angel».



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PLATE XIV

THE DIVINE WISDOM

Novgorod School, 15th century. 16½ × 14 in.
Coll. George R. Hann, Pittsburgh, USA.

The Divine Wisdom (1st Corinthians. 1. 30) is an appellation given to the Son of God by the Byzantine theologians. Hence the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople is a church dedicated to Christ. On the icons picturing the « Holy Wisdom, the Wisdom of God » we see St. Sophia, personifying an attribute of the Godhead, as an independent being, splendidly enthroned, robed in scarlet, with the attributes of the Byzantine Emperors, a sceptre in her hand and a circular nimbus round her head. To right and left, in dark robes, there stand the Virgin holding a round shield with the figure of Christ Emanuel, and St. John the Baptist with a scroll. Above St. Sophia appears Christ, while at the top there is the « Preparation of the Throne » surrounded by angels. The throne of St. Sophia is seen in reversed perspective, in the same way as in an icon of the Novgorod School which is remarkable for the firmness of its composition and its beautiful colouring.

In the same way as in Byzantine frescoes and easel pictures, all icons in Russian religious painting are accompanied by explanatory texts. These solemn inscriptions complete the picture, which only attains its full effect by the statement in words of its sacred subject.



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